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Israel eyes Syrian troop movements warily

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Israel's Army has watched with some apprehension Syria's withdrawal of more than 10,000 troops from east Lebanon in the past month.

Israeli military sources say they are worried about where the two Syrian armored divisions will go next.

"They might end up facing the Golan Heights, or they could end up on the border with Jordan," says an Israeli government expert on Syria. "Both places could be bad news."

If Syria redeploys more forces on its side of the disengagement lines of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, it would put military pressure on Israel.

Redeployment along the border with Jordan would put military and political pressure on Jordan's King Hussein, who is pursuing a peace plan with Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat that has incurred Syria's wrath.

Israeli military analysts say they were pleased Syria did not move troops closer to Israel's northern border this spring when Israel left its positions in eastern Lebanon. For almost three years, Israeli and Syrian troops stood within shooting distance of one another.

Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin had publicly warned the Syrians not to advance any farther south after

the Israelis left. Such an advancement might have led to a confrontation between the two strongest military powers in the Middle East.

Instead, Syrian President Hafez Assad has pulled what Mr. Rabin estimated Sunday night to be 20 percent of his forces out of Lebanon altogether.

What analysts here are now trying to assess is how much of a threat Syria's enlarged and enriched Army would pose to Israel should the Syrians decide to turn their attentions away from Lebanon.

They differ in their interpretation of why the Syrians chose to withdraw some of their estimated 30,000 troops deployed inside Lebanon. One view is that the Syrians were convinced they no longer were in danger of an Israeli attack through the Bekaa. Others say the Syrians no longer needed such a large military presence in Lebanon because their political and military muscle there is not seriously questioned by any of the Lebanese factions.

Yesterday, in fact, Syrian Vice-President Abdel Halim Khaddam played host to the leaders of Lebanon's Shiite Muslim, Sunni Muslim, and Druze communities in another effort to hammer out a security arrangement in Beirut. Fighting has renewed in recent days between the Druze and Shiite Amal militias in Beirut, and also between pro- and anti-Syrian factions in Tripoli. The Syrians have said they want to reach a security agreement that will lead to broader political reforms and a restoration of some semblance of order in the anarchic Lebanese capital.

Israeli government officials and military analysts say privately and publicly that they would be happy to see the Syrians bogged down in Lebanon's interminable battles.

However, the Golan Heights — a 15-mile wide plateau captured by Israel during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war — remains a thorn in Mr. Assad's side. The Syrian President's role as leader of the "steadfastness front" against Israel has been enhanced by his ability to outmaneuver both the Americans and the Israelis in Lebanon. He maintains his hard-line position of not negotiating with Israel and continues to advocate the concept of achieving "strategic parity" with Israel through the help of Soviet arms.

King Hussein and Mr. Arafat's declared determination to seek a peaceful settlement for the Palestinians has alarmed Assad. State-run Damascus Radio often denounces the effort as a plot to isolate Syria and sell out the Palestinian cause for a partial settlement. In Syrian

terms, that would be any settlement that did not return the Golan to Syria.

The view in Israel is that if Assad launched an attack on Israel, it would be a limited one, lasting 24 to 48 hours. The goal would be to grab a piece of the Golan back, then hunker down until Syria's ally, the Soviet Union, could push through a United Nations cease-fire resolution.

What has made some military analysts in Jerusalem jittery is their feeling that Israel's deterrent capability has been damaged by the war in Lebanon. The Syrians, these analysts say, perceive themselves as the winners and Israel as the loser in the war and its aftermath.

"There is no doubt that there are military indications to the effect that the Syrians are considering the option of an action on the Golan," says one military source. "They are filling in their camps from the disengagement line toward Damascus, and clearly there is a change in the balance of forces on the Golan Heights." But this same source insists that the Syrians would be unwilling to take the risk in the foreseeable future of launching an attack that might fail.

The Syrians would have to achieve almost total surprise "to be sure of no pre-emption," he says.

Syria, another analyst says, achieved success by financing groups in Lebanon that launched guerrilla attacks on Israeli forces occupying the south. Such a "low cost" strategy proved enormously effective, inflicting demoralizing casualties without risking direct Syrian-Israeli confrontation.

A continuation of such harassment, those interviewed generally agree, would be more likely than any concerted military assault by Syria.

"There are intelligence reports that raise concerns," one officer says. "The necessary conditions for a buildup toward a military encounter on the Golan are there, but not the sufficient conditions."